

This is the final Sunday in a 6-week series where we've been exploring The Apostles Creed. While we haven't covered everything in the Creed, we've explored enough to see what, very early on in our history, was considered essential if someone was going to be baptized a Christian. I'm both fascinated and frustrated that many of the things Christians are so willing to fight over today are not found in The Apostle's Creed, nor in any of the historic creeds from the early centuries of Christianity.

But one essential belief, according to the Creed, is the affirmation of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. This affirmation is rooted in Jesus' resurrection and his promise of eternal life. I can tell you that one of the questions many of teens and young adults grapple with is whether or not they can affirm the physical resurrection of Jesus.

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I want to begin today by looking at Mark 16, which includes a footnote [a] at the end of v. 8. That footnote is there because many of us grew up with Bibles that include 11 more verses after v. 8. The footnote indicates that the most ancient manuscripts of Mark really ended at v. 8; that the other 11 verses that were later appended to Mark's Gospel. These 11 verses recount **3 resurrection appearances** of Jesus.

But if the *original* gospel of Mark ended at 16:8, that means Mark's gospel did not originally include ANY resurrection appearances by Jesus. The gospel, as you can clearly see, originally came to an end when the women discover that the tomb where Jesus had been laid is empty.

Now, of the four gospels, Mark was written soonest after Jesus' died. (Some of you may not yet know the NT books aren't in chronological order! Paul's letters, for example, were actually written *before* any of the 4 Gospels.) Mark was written about 30 years after Jesus' life, and Matthew and Luke were written between 10 and 30 years *after* Mark. What all this means is that early converts to Christianity, who only had Mark's gospel as the testimony to Jesus, did not come to believe Jesus was resurrected *because* of miraculous resurrection appearances. Their belief in Jesus resurrection was based solely on the assertion that his tomb was empty.

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But even before the four gospels, the apostle Paul proclaimed that belief in the resurrection as essential. In 1 Corinthians 15:12, Paul asserts, "If Christ hasn't come back to life, our message has no meaning and

your faith also has no meaning." Paul wrote these words within 20 years of Jesus' crucifixion.

What's interesting is that Paul himself did not experience the resurrected Jesus, at least as we typically think. Remember that Paul, then known as Saul, was in the business of persecuting Jesus's followers. His conversion story is in Acts. As Saul is on the way to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus, Acts 3:9 tell us "a bright light from heaven flashed around him, and he heard the voice of Jesus asking, 'Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?'"

So, like those who trusted Mark's gospel of the empty tomb, Paul was converted without the benefit of an encounter with a physically resurrected body. And yet Paul proclaims that the resurrection is crucial; that if Jesus is not raised, then our faith is baseless.

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Let's look at two modern views on the resurrection put forward by two well respected Biblical scholars; Marcus Borg, an Episcopalian, and NT Wright, an Anglican priest. In a terrific book, *Speaking Christian*, Marcus Borg asserts that the Easter stories should be understood metaphorically; as *parables* which reveal to us that death could not hold Jesus.

Borg argues that whatever we believe about the tomb is *irrelevant* because the bottom line is that Easter affirms that even crucifixion could not stop what Jesus had begun. The central issue, Borg says, is what Easter **meant** to Jesus' followers. And what Easter meant to them is: 1) that "Jesus is alive" and that 2) "Jesus is Lord."

I do not think we should be too quick to reject this argument, because what Borg suggests may actually require a **deeper faith** than many of us can claim. Borg is asking a hypothetical question: "If we discovered the bones of Jesus, would that mean that Easter is not true?" Borg says that our belief that 'Jesus is alive' and 'Jesus is Lord' should not be dislodged *even* if Jesus' remains were found, because his life-giving message remains eternally true!

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While I see the value of Borg's point of view, I don't share it. Based on the scholarship of NT Wright, several things persuade me that Jesus' resurrection is *more* than a parable or metaphor. Here are four things that I find convincing...

Let's begin with 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, where Paul writes: "³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was

buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.”

This was written by Paul within 20 years of Jesus’ death and it was meant to be read aloud in a public setting. By alluding to living eyewitnesses, Paul is inviting anyone with doubts that Jesus appeared after his death to go and question the eyewitnesses. ***But Paul could not have suggested such a thing if eyewitnesses did not exist.*** That doesn’t mean the eyewitnesses would’ve convinced doubters or skeptics, but it is nonetheless a bold invitation.

Second, all of the gospels tell us that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. But this is strange. At that time women were of such low social status that their testimony was not even admissible as evidence in court. So there is no advantage in saying the first witnesses were women. This would undermine the credibility of the resurrection claims and so there would’ve been a great deal of pressure, if it were possible, to expunge the women from the record and to say that men were the first witnesses. ***The only reason to say the women were the first witnesses is, they really were.***

A third reason I find the resurrection believable is because I reject the idea that it was easier for Jesus’ followers to believe in his resurrection than it is for us. C.S. Lewis called this ‘chronological snobbery’, the idea that modern people take the claim of a bodily resurrection with skepticism, while the ancients, being much more superstitious and unsophisticated, would’ve been more easily duped.

This actually flies in the face of how ancient people responded to the idea of resurrection. In the non-Jewish Mediterranean world, the physical body was considered totally corrupt. According to Plato, death liberated the soul from the bodily prison; and once this happened no one would want their body back! So to Greco-Roman thought, not only was physical resurrection impossible, ***it was undesirable.***

But how about Jewish thought in this same period? Though many Jews did believe in the resurrection of the dead, ***no one*** believed that just one person would be raised from death before the end of all time. Jews who believed in resurrection thought it would happen all at once when God intervened to restore the world and raised all righteous people from death to life.

So, in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worldviews, bodily resurrection would’ve been as unthinkable as it is in our own time. If we look at everything we know, first-century people would have found the possibility of Jesus’ resurrection as inconceivable as any modern-day skeptic.

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I should note that resurrection does not mean a resuscitated corpse. According to the gospels the risen Jesus seemed both corporeal and incorporeal. According to Scripture, the risen Christ both ate and drank, but was also, at times, unrecognizable to his followers and passed through closed doors... From a Scriptural perspective, it’s clear that Jesus resurrected body is similar, but different than it once was.

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But there’s one more thing I find convincing. The gospels tell us that Jesus’ defeated and demoralized disciples went into hiding following his crucifixion. They hid because Jesus’ death on a Roman cross proved that ***they’d been pinning their hopes on the wrong guy.*** And yet, something launched them out of hiding and whatever that was, it led virtually all the apostles and early Christian leaders to die for their faith.

Now it’s true that people kill for their faith, and that cult members have given up their lives in suicide pacts. But those circumstances are far different than what the disciples did following experiences of the risen Christ. They did not take lives, not even their own. No, they became willing to ***give up their lives*** in the same way as Jesus. So, it was not only stories of the resurrection that persuaded early converts, ***it was the transformed way that Jesus’ followers were living in response to their experiences with their resurrected Lord.***

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Now, none of this proves the resurrection, but it faith isn’t about proof, it’s about trust and I trust the testimony that has been given... In 1947, Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote this: “Dear friends—the most certain thing we know about our future is that we must die, and that everything that makes life worthwhile for us will be destroyed. No beautiful words can change that. Death is the end. The question is whether beyond this end [there] a still greater hope than everything the earth has given us.”

My answer to that question – is there beyond this end a still greater hope than everything the earth has given us is summed up this way: I believe “in the resurrection and in the life everlasting.” Amen.